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AUTHOR Dentler, Robert A.
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of a 3-year, federally funded comparative study of 11 public school districts and 40 schools in metropolitan areas of California, Arizona, and Nevada. The purpose was to identify school districts that are successfully meeting the challenge of educating relatively high numbers of newcomer students (ethnic and language minorities and immigrants), to compare these districts systematically with less successful districts, and to search for models of success that might be shared. The communities were heavily affected by ethnic and language minority students in the 1980s, and differed markedly in their achievement-gain scores. Examination of their histories and local cultures led the research team to conclude that score differences were not the result of chance. There were three communities with proactive, responsive, adaptive, and innovative public instruction, and eight in more or less severe states of confusion and inefficiency. Superintendents who succeeded regarded cultural diversity as a strength of their schools. The evidence suggests that schools and districts can help to lift or to depress student-learning outcomes. The study supports current research literature in suggesting that very large districts have a difficult time succeeding if they contain large numbers of very disadvantaged students. (Contains 2 references.) (SLD)

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AN OVERVIEW OF A FIELD STUDY OF URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE FAR WEST

By Robert A. Dentler, Senior Fellow,
McCormack Institute of Public Affairs
University of Massachusetts at Boston

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AN OVERVIEW OF A FIELD STUDY OF URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN THE FAR WEST

Introduction

The United States experienced a tremendous rise in immigration during the 1980s. The greatest impact took place in the metropolitan areas of the far western states, particularly in California. When the unmet needs of great numbers of already enrolled ethnic and lingual minority students were added to this costly and complex impact from new immigration, many public school districts faced extreme challenges in structuring opportunities to learn and in the delivery of service. Rates of socioeconomic, lingual, and multicultural change accelerated tremendously in hundreds of districts whose customary modes of instruction and of service delivery were geared to much more modest rates of change.

This paper presents an overview of a three year, federally funded, comparative study of 11 public school districts and 40 of their schools in the metropolitan areas of California, Arizona, and Nevada (Dentler et al, 1993). The purpose of the study was to identify school districts that are successfully meeting the challenge of educating relatively high numbers of newcomer students, to compare them systematically with less successful

districts, and to search for typological models of success that might be shared with other districts and school practitioners. Papers in this session authored by Ann L. Hafner and Younghee Jang present the findings which bear most substantially upon local district staffing, instructional and program policies and practices, and upon the quality of health and human services in the districts studied.

Project team members knew that school districts and schools within them differ substantially in their performance in hosting and educating minority newcomers and disadvantaged students. We also knew that at least two more general factors shape the context in which these differences appear: First, the relative affluence or poverty of a community population is a powerful predictor of the teaching and learning outcomes of public school districts across a universe of communities; we called this the "structural dominance" effect. Second, the racial/ethnic composition of communities - both the proportion of minority households and their combinations - affects instructional performance conditions significantly.

The guiding purpose of the project was not to revisit these generalizations, however, but to locate, identify, and unify the characteristics of communities, school districts, and schools within them which accounted for their fundamental differences -

after the variables of poverty and ethnicity had been controlled statistically - in quality of treatment of learners. If this could be accomplished, and if some of the characteristics were amenable to deliberate, planned adoption, then the project would contribute one or more vital clues to models of performance for use in technical assistance work and in the exchange of knowledge between educational research and practice. The team sought answers, therefore, to these questions:

- Are there public school districts and schools in the metro West that succeed in educating disadvantaged children, and what is distinctive and exceptional about these districts ?
- Do these distinctive features form a pattem that contrasts with those in less successful districts and schools ?
- Can we devise a kind of ideal type of what works well academically and socially in hosting low income ethnic and language minority learners, and do the types have heuristic value for other communities and districts ?

Keeping in mind the independent influences of income, race, ethnicity, and language, as well as scope and pace of changes in minority emollments, this project organized its inquiry around a series of what team members conceptualized as major intervening variables. These can be summarized as follows:

Metro area communities and their public school districts vary substantially in their historical development and political cultures. The state contexts we studied vary greatly in depth of public fiscal investment in education, in proactivity in stimulating school improvement, and in receptivity to multicultural needs and interests. Within those contexts, communities reflect state trends but vary in their own origins, emphases, and practices.

The districts and their schools also vary in their treatment of disadvantaged learners as a function of the ways in which they are organized and how their organization is designed and executed to assist those learners.

The districts and their schools also vary in the quality with which they design and implement educational and social service programs, and parts of this variation will stem from the characteristics, abilities and working conditions of the teachers.

Study Design and Methods

The original study design for the project was elegant and parsimonious. It consisted of a multiple regression analysis of independent demographic and economic variables drawn from census data and intervening school district characteristics, combined to account for variance in mean gain scores on student achievement tests taken over time. The team expected that the resulting regression slope would make it possible to identify deviant districts from the universe of metropolitan districts in the states of Arizona, California, and Nevada. Field research in a sample of the deviant case districts would enable comparisons between high and low performing districts.

The real world crushed this elegant design, however. There was no available data base from which to build an inventory of metropolitan area school districts, for example. Long and arduous efforts by the team to do so were impeded by the fact that in Califomia, there is little correspondence between municipal and school district boundaries. Most crushing for the design effort was the fact that the fully detailed 1989 federal census for Califomia was greatly delayed in its publication. Project team members had anticipated the problem of multiple, contradictory and fragmented achievement test score data among the three states, but the problem proved to be more severe than expected.

Some districts did not comply fully with state policies; there were uneven shifts in years, grade levels, and types of test instruments. One of the most challenging of all sources of error was the fact that districts varied widely in the percentage of limited-English proficient students who were regularly tested.

These challenges were met by the project, but only because the research team accepted a fairly high level of risk of measurement error. The task was facilitated mostly by the fact that Califomia has good recorded data on district level state achievement test scores from the years from 1984 through 1990. Califomia dominated the sampling design in any event, with 80 percent of the more than 1,200 metro districts coming from it; therefore those records became the foundation for the study design.

Achievement change scores for the universe of metro area school districts - once districts within standard metro areas which actually had rural characteristics were removed - consisted of the standardized difference between 1984 mean reading and math scores for grades 3, 6, and 8, and the equivalent scores from 1989.

From among these districts, those highest on demographic change from 1980 to 1990 were selected. And, from among these, the districts with high positive (high performers) and high

negative change (low performers) were examined and developed into a list of possible case study sites in California and Arizona. Nevada is organized into county districts and among those, only two counties met the metropolitan area criteria. Thus those two counties were included in the sites sampled.

The final selection of sites to be studied in the field was essentially purposive: Districts were selected from among those on the long list because (1) they departed significantly from no change in achievement; (2) they had enrolled increasing numbers of new minority and disadvantaged students during the 1980s; and (3) they were based in comparatively low income communities. Those ultimately visited, in turn, comprised a sample from within this sublist which was made up of the districts who were willing to accept the burden of interviews, observational visits, and documentation. Twelve districts were thus finally targeted and studied; one was dropped because field data collection there proved to be inadequate.

Most of the participating field researchers were trained in the data collection and reportwriting procedures at common sessions held in the Spring of 1992. A few field researchers filled in schedule gaps later on, following briefing and orientation by more experienced senior staff. The researchers traveled to the sites in pairs. Each pair spent at least five

full days interviewing board members, administrators, teachers, and parents on site, and observing in detail at from two to three pre-selected schools. Districts with high schools had those taken into research account, but the project focus was very primarily fixed on grades K-8. The largest districts in the series, were visited more extensively than others. Administrators provided documentation on enrollments, staffing, finances, and programs, and answered many after-visit questions by phone and correspondence.

Each pair of field researchers wrote a unified case report, following an outline developed and included in the team training sessions. These reports were coded qualitatively and cross-filed page by page and placed in a "mother file" at SWRL headquarters. These cross-files and the eleven case reports, combined with documentation from the districts, then became the material on which analyses and interpretations were based.

Quantitative Findings

The project team generated from the large data set a matrix of the zero order correlations across California metropolitan districts between mean achievement test scores in 1984 and 1989 and five indicators of student disadvantagement status. A "structural dominance" effect (Persell, 1977) is strongly suggested by these correlations: The percentage of

children and youth below the federal poverty line in 1980 correlated r=-.73 with 1985 mean math and reading achievement score. The percentage of students with poor English language skills correlated r=-.59 with mean achievement scores. The proportion of racial/ethnic minority students in the district in 1989 correlated r=.72 with 1990 mean math and reading achievement scores. Thus, in general, school districts in California are very substantially stratified in their student achievement outcomes as a function of their per capita wealth and percentage of ethnic and lingual minority households.

The achievement change scores are not correlated with these independent demographic variables, however. This is reasonable because a district with high poverty in 1980, for instance, would probably yield low mean achievement results in 1984, and would generally repeat that relational pattern in 1990. While the poverty level persisted, however, learning outcomes might improve, change very little, or decline relative to 1984.

Five rating scales intended to measure school quality on five different dimensions were developed by the team. Each represented a scale score attributed to each school visited by the paired field researchers, which were then merged and made into district scale scores. All five scales were significantly intercorrelated across the districts. Percent of students in

poverty was positively correlated with each of the scales, as was percent LEP students and percent minority students with four scales. In other words, quality of school programs, teaching, and human relations was hi~her in the most disadvantaged communities. The performance of districts in changing achievement scores over time was not significantly correlated with any of the five rating scales, however. The three highest perfo~ning districts among the eleven were substantially higher than any other districts on three of the five rating scales.

Community History and Culture

All eleven communities and their public schools were chosen for comparative analysis because they were heavily impacted by ethnic and language miinority students during the 1980s and because they differed markedly in their achievement gain scores over those years (except for the stable districts). Examination of their histories and local cultures led the research team to a very definite conclusion that the score differences were in no way the result of chance. There were three communities with proactive, responsive, adaptive, and innovative public instruction - and there were eight communities in more or less severe states of inaction, fractiousness, and confusion.

Two of the three high performing districts, Kennedy and Bayside, have included several ethnic and language minority subcommunities for two generations. The third district, Valley View, was monocultural and ethnically homogeneous until the 1980s, but as it began to host large numbers of minority newcomers it was exceptionally distinctive in its welcoming attitude toward newcomers - a predisposition grounded in the Anglo political leadership's pride in being welcoming, inclusive and multiculturally responsive.

Organization

Analyses of the organizational structure, personnel commitments, and dynamic functioning of the districts and their schools within the larger system context of the states and communities disclosed several ways in which high performing districts move, or fail to move, to assimilate the rising numbers of disadvantaged students. The elements of success are too interdependent to be rank ordered, but are summarized here in terms of scope of power:

School Board

Ethnic and language minority groups that have recently arrived are represented on the board, and more veteran Anglo board members do not coalesce around opposition to program

changes. Most board members agree strongly that the superintendent should be empowered to change the district's programs in order to host and educate newcomers effectively. They back the superintendent's efforts to do this and do not fight among themselves. Support for changes in policy and practice, combined with board member visitation and participation in the school lives of children and staff, are necessary features of board success.

Superintendent

The superintendents who succeed regard cultural diversity as a strength of their schools and are pragmatically very active in every aspect of their districts, while allocating their influence and resources around a priority concern with serving disadvantaged children and youth. This priority, often best expressed in efforts to promote billingual instruction that works, is carried out by successful superintendents through a wide and deep network of involvements that they pursue in district, statewide, and even national organizations and peer contacts. It is not the superintendent's gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background which distinguishes success from mediocrity and failure in serving disadvantaged minority students; rather, it is her or his professional identification with the positive importance of that service that matters most.

Other Professional Staff

Successful districts maintain small administrative staffs and invest their resources in pay, benefits, training opportunities, and support for teachers. Superintendents involve themselves directly in the selection of principals, assistant principals, and bilingual teachers in the successful districts. Those staff, in turn, are singularly dedicated to very high levels of individual and team involvement in community relations and to long hours of extra effort within their school sites. They have the autonomy needed to do outstanding work within the constraints of district policy commitment to instruction and child-centered service, and they express a strong sense of their empowerment. At the same time they interact frequently, intensely, and trustingly with the central administration. Site-based management may or may not be the rhetoric used within the high performing districts, and there are important variations in programs from building to building, but administrators and teachers in the successful districts share a common set of objectives to benefit disadvantaged learners.

Success is also strongly associated with the quality of leadership exerted by building principals. Every one of the eleven districts had some high-performing, professionally effective principals, but the three high performing districts had

principals of this caliber in nearly every building the field teams visited. These comparatively extraordinary educational leaders were observably intensely involved with teachers, custodians, parents, community volunteers, and colleagues at district headquarters. They were articulate, enthusiastic, and dedicated to the strengthening of their programs, and they had not only been selected because they could perform in this way; they were backed and celebrated by the superintendent and board members for their excellent efforts.

Educational Programs and Teachers

The most distinctive feature of the high performing districts is a programmatic emphasis on student language development, in particular on multi-language instruction. They also show corresponding adequacy in teacher recruitment and support. Bilingual teachers are the educational backbone of the best second language programs, the researchers found. The great range of programs carried on by all of the districts appears to make very little overall difference: It is the quality of implementation and the cooperative integration between the programs which has a marked effect. All of the districts and nearly all of the schools we visited had federal Chapter 1 funds, for example. The high performing districts use most of those funds to supplement and enrich the core curriculum of the

district, which is itself designed to benefit disadvantaged learners, while low performing districts tend to use the funds to pull slow learners or at-risk students out of their regular classes for brief periods of special enrichment or tutoring and remediation.

The three high performing districts differ markedly from other districts, not in teacher cledentials or pay, but in the intensity and quality of the effort expended to rec;ruit and support teachers professionally; in collaborative relations between teachers, parents, and administrators; and in quality of inservice training opportunities for self-development. Teachers in the high performing districts are not only mo~e consistendy matched ethnically and by language with their students; proportionately more of them are certified bilingual and ESL instructors as well.

And, teachers in the high performing districts display higher, more positive morale; express their sense that they enjoy considerable autonomy within and under the shared goals of their schools and districts; and simply exhibit higher, more focused energy in the conduct of their work than their counterparts in other districts. These teachers also communicate higher acadernic expectations to their students; believe all students can learn, recognize and reward their students symbolically more often; and

take more pride in their own instructional successes.

The most successful districts provided structures that facilitate the ability of teachers to deliver more effective instruction. These include team teaching, equalized access of all students to a core curriculum, flexible grouping methods, and norms opposed to tracking and ability grouping. High performing districts show a common emphasis on certain instructional approaches as well: A focus on rneaning, encouraging active student pafticipation, validating multicultural experiences, using manipulatives and realia and a literature-based language arts program.

Some of these efforts and approaches were present in low performing districts, of course. We found that it is the adoption of the full range of practices that differentiates between high and low performing districts.

Other Services

All of the districts suffer gravely from rising rates of crime, violence, drugs, and family breakdown. Isaac, the most harmonious district in the sarnple, held the record for the most driveby shootings of any subcommunity of Phoenix in 1991, for example. And, all of the districts offer various protective and supportive services for their students.

The high performing districts differ sharply from others in

the sample, however, on the scope and quality of their provision of social, health, and psychological services for schoolchildren. These districts display closer collaboration between the schools and social and health agencies and police; have strong community support and involvement; integrate relations with diverse ethnic subcommunities; and, overall, make a much more pragmatically detailed, professionally aware investment in non-educational services than other districts. Instead of a debate about where public school help should be limited - for example, to instruction and schoolday security only - high performing districts are unified in their political determination to do what it takes to host and treat children and youth humanely and in all ways that optimize their growth and life chances.

The differences are not due to fiscal resources. Some of the poorest districts do the most in providing good services, while some of the wealthiest do the least. The low performning districts generally do not invest politically, financially or through contributions in time and effort to making sure that low income newcomers are well received and comprehensively served.

Some Interpretations

A multiple case comparison is limited in its ability to identify explanations for the pattern of differences between observed behaviors and documented events. Such a design can only

verge on causal hypotheses, for example. This is especially so when the comparisons are grounded in one-time site visits, even where these include collection of historical trends. But comparative case analysis does permit the elimination by reduction of some ideas that seemed promising from the literature or from school lore, and case analysis also points toward some practices that have greater empirical credence than do others as sources of success in fostering achievement.

Three quite divergent interpretations of the nature and sources of achievement for disadvantaged students are contradicted by our findings, for example. One of these has been fashionable since the Coleman report of 1966. It argues that family background determines achievement outcomes and that schools are of very limited importance in the process. A second has been that the effect of "structmal dominance" is so pervasive, leaving poor minorities so shortchanged in so many ways, that total distributive equity is needed before improvements in outcomes can be expected. And a third proposition has been that parental and individual student effort to succeed - not the quality of what is provided by the schools - is what counts most.

The evidence from this study is that public school districts and their individual schools can in fact help to lift

or depress student learning outcomes, even while socioeconomic, ethnic and language minority status affect the process in their characteristically powerful way. There are communities in which schools make a great positive difference in the growth and life chances of the children, and this difference, doubtless affected one by one by differences in family relations and individual effort, can be organized and acted upon by communities intentionally.

Individual efforts, in other words, are often conditioned by local cultures and the quality of service delivered by educators. A newly arrived, poor, limited English proficient child in Kennedy, Bayside, or Valley View, may be highly motivated and strongly supported by her family, for example, but she will be reinforced greatly in her efforts by the quality of teaching, health and protective services, and the comprehensive welcome she receives in contrast to the discouragement she would face in many other, more conventional school districts. She would in effect be provided with greater opportunities to learn than a student in low performing districts would be.

This study can not tell us whether the size of a school district's enrollment is determinative of success or failure because the sample is too small and contains too few big districts. It does support the best current research literature,

however, in suggesting that very large size districts - those in excess of 15,000 perhaps - have a very difficult time succeeding if they are composed of proportionately large numbers of very disadvantaged learners. Tumbleweed is our case in point. Size in itself is not a cause of success or failure, but where poverty and minority status are present in high degrees, small districts probably have beKer prospects of organizing for success in their treatment of children. Our historical evidence suggests, moreover, that fractiousness, dissent, and bureaucratic pathologies tend to get built into big districts as they grow in size over time. It also suggests that the low performing large districts were ineffective when they were much smaller, as well, and that the sources for this persist over generations.

The intervening factors this report examines in detail all influence the hosting and treatment of students. Each matters strongly. What matters far more, however, is their combination and organizational integration into a policy structure which defines the mission of the district. High performing districts in our sample are distinguished by the ubiquitous presence of comrnunity and school system staff commitments to serve disadvantaged children and youth effectively.

Instructional and related service program ingredients are widely understood by the hundreds of practitioners we interviewed. They

are described by federal and state agencies, given special categorical funding from these agencies, and figure extensively in inservice training sessions focused on NEP and LEP instruction, whole language approaches, hands-on science teaching, and so forth. Only a few districts "turn the corner," so to speak, in concentrating their political will and financial resources on fostering and mounting an ever-growing and changing ~ on the finite inequities of favoring some groups above others and on the challenges posed by poverty, family vulnerability, and the absence of culminating rewards for students who do their very best to beat the odds.

Our case reports show that a comprehensive, shared vision of the sort common to the high performing districts can come into being under a variety of historical, cultural, and educational conditions. Kennedy's vision, for example, evolved historically from events during World War II in the transformation from a semi-rural district on the far fringe of Phoenix to a truly urban, multiethnic distnct skilled in attracting external resources and proud of its ability to welcome and serve newcomers. In other words, Kennedy benefited from having decades of practice in, and adapting its community and schools to, great changes in demography, economy, and urbanization of the surrounding county. Valley View built its vision of success upon

Anglo pride in the hospitality and multicultural good will of its historically homogenous community. As it faced great challenges of Latino in-movement during the 1980s, Valley View's decision makers chose with rather clear political preference to stress its inclusiveness and its determination to preseNe and extend equal educational treatment to all students. In political behavior terms, leaders made a choice between strengthening their power bases by urging neglect and avoidance of the newcomers or by increasing their outreach to new constituents. The latter course produced learning advantages for students.

Conversely, Desert View is a community in possibly terminal economic decline. As such, it will continue to house families and, as a bedroom community, have children to educate, but it may well come to where it merges its school district with more viable communities around it. Some other districts in our low performing group are unlikely to pursue a vision of improved help for newcomers because they continue to be organized around the allocation of resources to the middle class Anglo households who dominate their communities politically and economically. This is also true of the metropolitan county districts in Nevada.

A comprehensive vision of excellent schooling and service delivery for all children will tend, therefore, to emerge under certain conjecturally limited conditions. Federal and state

reforms appear to us unlikely to generate those conditions. Traces of those reforms, including categorical program and project funding, appear in all of our sample districts but do not differentiate them in their variable quality of functioning. If this is the case, transformative improvements in educational and related services for children hinge mainly upon local community politics, political culture, and school organization. It will matter greatly who runs for local office, who gets elected to the school board, and how these leaders choose, mandate, and then support a superintendent who reorganizes their district to make it comprehensively successful in hosting new generations of culturally diverse children.

Our comparisons suggest that the Coleman report was incorrect; that school districts can and sometimes do organize themselves to deliver excellent and pertinent instruction in spite of the demographic odds to the contrary. Similarly, the structural dominance perspective is a bit too deterministic; that countervailing organizational, instructional, and service delivery arrangements indeed emerge and are fostered in some communities.

While little is known about how to engineer change in political cultures, this study makes a contribution to those community leaders, parents and educators who are committed to

improving the conditions that shape the opportunity to learn of disadvantaged newcomers. Its contribution rests in identifying some of the features and practices that matter most.

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